

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Better Than Cash Alliance Can Boost Afghanistan's Economy

23 January 2013

Washington — Afghanistan's decision to join the Better Than Cash Alliance will help address poverty and promote economic growth, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) says.

USAID is a founding partner of the alliance, along with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Citi, the Ford Foundation, Omidyar Network, U.N. Capital Development Fund and Visa Inc. The alliance seeks to empower people by transitioning from cash to electronic payments.

The shift to electronic payments in programs that currently distribute cash or in-kind goods to people living in poverty can result in significant cost savings, transparency, security and economic growth, USAID said in a January 22 press release. For example, a recent report by the World Bank found that governments can save up to 75 percent of costs by shifting to electronic payment programs.

Today, 2.5 billion adults — more than a third of the world's population — are excluded from the formal financial sector, according to USAID. This is most acute in the developing world, where approximately 80 percent of poor people are excluded. As a result, most poor households have no option but to subsist almost entirely in an informal, cash-only economy, making it extraordinarily difficult for them to access financial services such as bank accounts, to save for the future, build assets or get credit.

Electronic payments can create lasting benefits for people by creating opportunities to access formal financial services and begin to develop assets and save for the future, USAID said.

PILOT PROJECTS IN AFGHANISTAN

There are many needs and opportunities to transition from cash to electronic payments in Afghanistan, USAID said. Currently, there are nearly 1 million Afghan government employees unable to receive their salaries electronically. Fewer than 5 percent of Afghans have bank accounts.

Afghanistan's Ministry of Finance currently is partnering with the Ministry of Education and the Association of Mobile Money Operators on an innovative teacher salary payment pilot that aims to increase the number of bank accounts and electronic salary payments.

The Afghan government is also conducting a mobile/electronic utility payment pilot in Kabul targeting 100,000 electricity customers. Nearly 60 percent of all Afghans have mobile phones and more than 83 percent of the population live in areas with mobile network coverage.

"We are pleased to join the Better Than Cash Alliance as a committing member dedicated to making the transition from cash to electronic payments," said Director-General of Treasury Mohammed Aqah of Afghanistan's Ministry of Finance. "We recognize the value of accelerating the use of safe electronic payments as a solution for promoting financial inclusion, increasing transparency, and creating a more secure world for women and their families."

Afghanistan joins the governments of Colombia, Kenya, Peru and the Philippines, along with development organizations USAID, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Food Programme, Mercy Corps, CARE USA, Chemonics International and Concern Worldwide, which have committed to digitize their disbursements and payments to people living in poverty, thereby becoming eligible members for technical and financial support from the Better Than Cash Alliance.

"We commend Afghanistan on their leadership and commitment to empower people by transitioning to electronic payments," said Ruth Goodwin-Groen, managing director of the Better Than Cash Alliance. "While the benefits of electronic payments are many, this shift requires resources and technical expertise and we look forward to providing this through our partnership with Afghanistan."

MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS AND BENEFITS

To join the Better Than Cash Alliance a government, company or organization must:

- Make a new commitment to digitize its disbursement of payments.
- Designate senior staff member(s) to create and implement a change management program to reduce physical cash payments.
- Share lessons learned with the Better Than Cash Alliance to inspire and equip others to overcome transition challenges.

As a partner, organizations will be:

- Eligible for technical assistance and/or funding to support the transition, if needed.
- Recognized for leadership in Better Than Cash Alliance publications and media.
- Invited to participate in learning opportunities as

appropriate.

- Given access to the latest research and case studies about lessons learned and what's working for other Better Than Cash Alliance program partners.

The Better Than Cash Alliance works with governments, the development community and the private sector to adopt the use of electronic payments and provides resources to those who commit to make the transition. USAID will use its programs to help transition developing countries from cash payments to electronic payments with an eye toward greater gender equality and financial inclusion.

Opportunity Rover Begins 10th Year on Mars

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 23 January 2013

Washington — The NASA rover Opportunity — a veteran craft scarred by time and sandstorms — enters its 10th year exploring the surface of Mars. Opportunity and its twin rover Spirit landed on the Red Planet on January 24, 2004.

The two craft were targeted to land in different spots, but they shared a mission: Seek evidence that water once flowed on what is now a dry, dusty place.

Opportunity's designers projected a three-month working life and about 600 meters of travel. That mission was fulfilled in the first months when the rover relayed information back to Earth to convince scientists that water had long ago soaked the small crater where the rover landed.

Opportunity has now had a working life 36 times longer than the initial mission.

"What's most important is not how long it has lasted or even how far it has driven, but how much exploration and scientific discovery Opportunity has accomplished," said John Callas, manager of the Mars Exploration Rover Project headquartered at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in California. The twin craft, Spirit, ceased communicating in 2010.

Opportunity has traveled across more than 35 kilometers of the Martian surface, moving to examine craters. The walls of these surface pits offer natural exposure to deeper, older layers of the planet's geologic history.

This month, Opportunity has turned its cameras and investigative tools to outcrops on a crater 22 kilometers in diameter. Its findings so far indicate a different, possibly older wet environment that is less acidic than conditions uncovered at other stops on the rover's extended journey.

The craft continues its work, but not without some

handicaps. Opportunity has been driving in reverse gear since 2006 when one of its wheels jammed.

Though Spirit stopped transmitting data, the craft made some important discoveries in its day. Spirit detected minerals and sulfates in the soil that formed in the presence of water in the planet's past.

Curiosity, the rover NASA landed on Mars in August 2012, is several hundred kilometers away, but it is a direct descendant of Opportunity and Spirit. The engineering, operations and scientific findings of the rovers who arrived in 2004 all contributed to the successful construction, flight and operations of the newest generation of Mars explorers.

Burmese, U.S. Players Joined by Hoops

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 22 January 2013

Washington — Accustomed to seeing basketball courts only in school gymnasiums, Burma hoops player Hnin Ei Thu was surprised to see public, outdoor courts in Washington parks.

Seeing plentiful and accessible sports facilities was just one of the things that impressed Ei Thu during her two-week visit to Washington and Charlotte, North Carolina, as a member of a 12-player national youth basketball team. Accompanied by two coaches, the team from Burma was the first sports group from the Southeast Asian country to visit the United States through the State Department's Sports Visitor Program. Basketball is becoming increasingly popular throughout Burma, said player Pore Min Son.

The January visit built on the first Sports Envoy Program that in August sent representatives of the U.S. National Basketball Association (NBA), including Burma-born Charlotte Bobcats general manager Richard Cho, and the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) to Burma.

Burma's team of six boys and six girls ages 15-17 came from all regions of the country of 56 million people. The youths participated in secondary school basketball clinics that focused on skills like physical conditioning and team building. They gained more on-court tips from members of the Washington Wizards and the Charlotte Bobcats during the professional teams' pre-game warm-ups.

The Burmese players also learned how to play the game from the perspective of players with disabilities. At a community center in Washington, Bill Green, whose lower body is paralyzed, told them about the history and rules of wheelchair basketball, a Special Olympics sport. Green then invited the youth to take their turns playing the game in wheelchairs specially designed for the sport.

Soon the teens were wheeling up and down the court, passing the ball and making baskets.

Ei Thu said she was impressed by how “disciplined” U.S. players are in following game rules. She added that when she returns to her hometown of Katha, in the Sagaing region of central Burma, she will tell her friends what she learned.

Min Son noticed that during games the U.S. players listened to each other. Min Son plans to use that sportsmanship skill throughout his life, he said. With hopes of going into business after he completes school, he said he “will always listen to my employees, understand them and respect them for what they do.”

He added that he liked interacting with Americans, calling it “a big step” in people-to-people diplomacy between the United States and Burma.

Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Tara Sonenshine explained the value of that big step. “When we bridge cultures, we don’t just enshrine what people treasure, we build richer, more diverse and mutually trusting partnerships for the future,” she said in Washington at the start of the players’ visit. “That makes cultural diplomacy an essential tool for the 21st century.”

Coach Ohn Mar Aung said the sportsmanship and problem-solving skills her players learned will be “valuable to them in the future.” When she returns to Burma, she intends to keep in touch with people she met in the United States and continue to find out what she can do there to help build public attention to the value of sports and of teamwork, she said.

Critical Chance Exists to Contain Some Diseases, Expert Says

22 January 2013

Washington — An influential leader in the global health community says scientific advances have created a great opportunity to “completely control highly dangerous infectious diseases such as AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.”

Dr. Mark Dybul writes about this opportunity in an essay released by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria as he becomes executive director of the Geneva-based organization. Dybul, a U.S. citizen and a physician, served as the global AIDS ambassador in President George W. Bush’s administration.

Dybul says it is critical that the global community seize that opportunity now “or else face the risk that the disease finds new forms that are far more complex and expensive to defeat.”

The emergence of extensively multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (XDR-TB) exemplifies Dybul’s warning about the emergence of more dangerous disease forms. Ordinarily, TB can be effectively treated with four standard medications. A variety of circumstances can result in the mismanagement or misuse of those drugs, however, and a resistant form of the TB bacteria can result, multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB). This form of the disease will respond to a second tier of anti-TB drugs, which are more expensive and have greater side effects. If treatment fails again, XDR-TB may surface and “treatment options are severely limited,” according to World Health Organization documents.

Prevention and treatment of infectious diseases is a great investment, writes Dybul, one that benefits entire societies, including “the larger communities and regions and countries whose economies and social fabric thrive on a healthy population.”

The new Global Fund executive director says it is challenging to push this agenda when financial constraints trouble so many nations. He believes it can be done with a concerted plan of action, including these elements:

- Demonstrate that investments in disease treatment and prevention programs are put to excellent use.
- Focus on impact and evaluation of investments.
- Combine every “evidence-based approach” that can prevent disease, and recognize that different countries will find different strategies effective.
- Make programs, and specifically the Global Fund, accountable and transparent.
- Work together, coordinating the efforts of technical experts, public health advocates and civil society.

With efforts guided by these principles, Dybul concludes, “these three diseases can be completely controlled and — with further scientific advancements — can actually be eliminated.”

Simon Bland, chairman of the Global Fund's governing board, said, “We are delighted to welcome Mark to the Global Fund [January 21]. We share his excitement and commitment to defeating the three diseases, and we look forward to working with him over the coming years.”

Prior to joining the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and rising to head that program as global AIDS ambassador, Dybul worked in a number of positions in U.S. government health agencies, including the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the Department of Health and Human Services. In those positions, he also acted as a U.S. representative to international health organizations such as the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV-AIDS (UNAIDS).

The Global Fund is an international financing institution created to raise and distribute funds to wage the global battle against infectious diseases. More than 1,000 programs in 151 countries have won backing from the fund to conduct a broad variety of carefully designed and targeted anti-disease initiatives since it was established in 2002. Over the decade, the organization presents a record of providing AIDS treatment for 4.2 million people, anti-tuberculosis treatment for 9.7 million people, and 310 million insecticide-treated bed nets to protect sleeping people from the bite of malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

The United States is the single largest donor to the Global Fund, having contributed almost \$7.3 billion since the organization began. Governments are the largest category of donors to the organization's work, with pledges exceeding \$28 billion since the inception of the fund.

President Obama, Vice President Biden Begin Their Second Terms

By Merle Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer | 21 January 2013

Washington – In a public ceremony attended by nearly 1 million supported and watched by millions more on television, President Obama challenged Americans to work together to uphold the promise of democracy and meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Obama presented a sweeping vision of his second term in his inaugural address from the U.S. Capitol that touched on the most sacred themes of American democracy. He quoted from the Declaration of Independence, which set America on its course as an independent nation:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

The president said that he and Vice President Biden will lead the United States on "a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time."

On January 21, Obama told the massive crowd gathered on the National Mall and millions more across the world via television that the United States will defend its people and uphold its values through "strength of arms and rule of law." America, Obama said, will try to resolve differences with other nations and among nations peacefully because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear.

"America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe; and we will renew those institutions that extend our capacity to manage crisis abroad, for no one has a greater stake in a peaceful world

than its most powerful nation," Obama said. "We will support democracy from Asia to Africa; from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom."

"And we must be a source of hope to the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the victims of prejudice – not out of mere charity, but because peace in our time requires the constant advance of those principles that our common creed describes: tolerance and opportunity; human dignity and justice," the president added.

He concluded his address saying that "with common effort and common purpose, with passion and dedication, let us answer the call of history, and carry into an uncertain future that precious light of freedom."

MONDAY'S PUBLIC EVENT PRECEDED BY PRIVATE CEREMONIES ON SUNDAY

Officially, both men's second terms began the day before, on January 20.

With his family by his side in the ornate Blue Room at the White House, President Obama placed his left hand on a family Bible, raised his right hand and took the oath of office shortly before noon from Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts to begin the second term of his presidency.

Obama, who is the 44th president and first African-American president, swore to "faithfully execute the office" and "preserve, protect and defend" the American Constitution. He continues a tradition begun 228 years ago. His swearing-in marked the 57th time an elected president has taken the oath of office to become the nation's president. The brief ceremony, at approximately 11:55 a.m. (1655 GMT) January 20 in front of a network television camera and selected family, guests and a small pool of White House journalists, lasted less than one minute. At the ceremony Obama used a Bible from first lady Michelle Obama's family. The president stood next to his wife and their two daughters, Sasha and Malia.

Chief Justice Roberts, wearing his official black robe, entered the Blue Room followed by the president and first family. Then Roberts, reading from a card, administered the oath of office and the president responded.

"I, Barack Hussein Obama, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, so help me God," Obama recited after Chief Justice Roberts.

The 20th amendment to the U.S. Constitution specifies

that presidents and vice presidents take the oath of office at noon on January 20 every four years, marking the peaceful, orderly transition of one administration to the next, as chosen by the American people after a general election. Because January 20 fell on a Sunday in 2013, a brief, private ceremony was held at the White House.

On January 21, the public ceremony on the west front of the U.S. Capitol was held, followed by a congressionally hosted luncheon, the accompanying inaugural parade led by the president and first lady, and then inaugural balls. In 2013, January 21 is also the federal holiday that honors the birthday of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

At the public ceremony on January 21, Obama used a Bible owned by President Abraham Lincoln and a Bible used by King. Obama becomes only the 17th U.S. president to be re-elected for a second term.

Vice President Joe Biden took the oath of office at 8:21 a.m. (1321 GMT) on January 20 at his official residence at the U.S. Naval Observatory in Northwest Washington with about 120 guests in attendance. Associate Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the first Hispanic and fourth woman justice, administered the oath at Biden's request. Biden used the Biden family Bible that is five inches thick, has a Celtic cross on the cover, and has been in the Biden family since 1893. That Bible has been used by Biden in every swearing-in ceremony since he entered the U.S. Senate in 1973, according to the White House.

Obama and Biden began their second terms January 20 with a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery, which overlooks Washington across the Potomac River in Northern Virginia. It is a poignant moment when presidents and vice presidents pause during a swirl of public inaugural events to remember and honor the service of the U.S. military.

U.S. Presidential Inaugurations Serve Multiple Purposes

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer | 18 January 2013

Washington — The inauguration of the president of the United States is a quasi-religious holiday, a celebrity gala and an opportunity for political management all rolled into one, according to professor Michael Cornfield, a political scientist at George Washington University in Washington.

Speaking January 18 at the Washington Foreign Press Center, Cornfield said the oath-taking is the religious part; the parades and the parties are the celebrity part; and the inaugural address is the political management element.

Beginning with George Washington, the first U.S. president, nearly every president has taken the oath of office with his hand on a Bible or Bibles.

"It is always a matter of interest what Bible the president is putting his hand on, whether there are going to be two books or one," he said. "In some cases, the book has been open to a particular passage of scripture. In some cases, the book is closed."

For his second term, President Obama plans to place his hand on two Bibles — one that was owned by the late civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr., and one owned by President Abraham Lincoln, who helped end slavery in the United States.

Inaugural parades and parties can be attributed to President James Madison's wife, Dolley, according to Cornfield. It was her idea, he said, to have the concerts, balls and celebratory regalia we see today when Madison became president back in 1809.

The inaugural address, Cornfield said, offers an American president the chance to set the tone for negotiating and implementing government policies in the term ahead.

"An inaugural address has been an opportunity for political strategy from the start," Cornfield said. "James Madison lobbied George Washington to include a line or two in his very first inaugural address advocating that Congress pass the Bill of Rights."

According to Cornfield, the inaugural address is also "as close as a regular American speechwriter gets to poetry." He cited what he called "the most famous line from any presidential inaugural address," John F. Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

The primary audiences for the inaugural address, Cornfield said, are the American people, the campaign coalition and the world at large. "This is a time when it is not inappropriate or prideful for a president to speak in terms of centuries and destinies and history and all of those big concepts that can sound pretentious if they're uttered at a fundraising event or even at a convention or — and certainly in Congress," Cornfield said.

Although the U.S. president is powerful, he is not a king or a dictator, Cornfield said. "The power he has, which is immense," Cornfield said, "is accountable, it is contingent, it is revocable."

One of the strengths of the U.S. political system, he said, is the peaceful transition of power.

"At our finest moments in American history," Cornfield

said, U.S. presidents have voluntarily shed the power of their office “and walked away from the office and gone home, either because they lost the election or because, as with Washington at the end of his second term, he had had enough, or because, as with Richard Nixon, he saw that he would be removed from office by Congress if he did not leave immediately.”

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